



**Mennonite  
Church**  
Canada

Resource Centre

# From our Churches

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## Walk a Mile in My Dad's Boots

In the past month, an old, hard and dusty pair of worn-out, lace-up leather work boots have received international attention. What you don't know is the rest of the story.

In the spring of 2006, my mother, Emmalien Lichti, decided to sell the house she and my father had built and lived in for 34 years in the village of Tavistock, Ontario. She no longer had need for the over 1300 square foot house after the death of my father, Elmon Lichti, in December 2005. This meant cleaning out and preparing the house for the real estate market.

On one of those many cleanup days, my brother, Jim Lichti, was clearing out "stuff" in a storage area my father had in the rafters of the garage, when he came upon an old pair of work boots. He showed the boots to my mother and asked about their story. Mom proceeded to say, "Why, those are the boots dad wore while serving as a Conscientious Objector". It was quickly determined that none of us wanted to have the boots, although I felt strongly they should be given to a museum or some organization, since they are an important part of Mennonite history. But where?

I knew Conrad Stoesz is involved with the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg and felt that was a good place to start. Conrad has also developed a web page telling the story of the Conscientious Objectors or "CO boys." Conrad was delighted to receive my e-mail and quickly shared his interest since artifacts are few and far between. The transfer of the boots occurred in March 2007 when I went to Winnipeg to attend Mennonite Church Canada Leadership Assembly Board meetings.

Now, you may think this is the end of the story - but not a chance!

Two and a half years later, on September 28, 2009, I received a phone call from Brenda Suderman, Faith page writer for the *Winnipeg Free Press*, asking if she could interview me about my dad's boots. She asked a lot of good, difficult questions during the 40-minute telephone interview. During our interview I asked how she found out about the boots. Here is what Brenda wrote back, and I quote:

*"I was visiting the Canadian War Museum this summer with my sons, ages 13 and 15, as part of our museum tours of Ottawa. After looking at most of the exhibits, my sons said they were tired of the "war stories" and so we looked for the exit, which has a place for writing postcards to the head of the museum, Members of Parliament, veterans, and so on. I wrote a postcard asking for the story of peacemakers and pacifists. About six weeks later I got a letter acknowledging my concern, and saying an exhibit was in the works curated by Amber Lloydlangston. I asked Alf Redekopp at the Heritage Centre about this, and he told me about Conrad Stoesz's involvement and the boots. Then when I talked to Conrad, he was about to ship the boots to Ottawa, so we scheduled an interview. Mostly, it was just following a reporter's nose and always being on the lookout for story ideas."*

Hence Brenda's story first appeared in the *Winnipeg Free Press* on October 4, 2009. The *Canadian Press* picked up the story, and four days later our local *K-W Record* published the ¼ page article!

But the story doesn't end there.

Two days after the story appeared in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, my mother was quilting at Tavistock Mennonite Church women's meeting when Pastor Paul Adams came down with a folder in his hand and showed my mother the article from the Winnipeg newspaper. She proceeded to tell the women the story. Paul then told the women how he got hold of the story. Half way around the world in South Korea, Will & Ana Loewen are serving with Mennonite Church Canada Witness. Will was a former pastor at Tavistock Mennonite Church where my parents attended. It was Will who alerted Pastor Paul to the story.

Curious to find out more details how Paul found out about the boots before anyone else in Ontario, I sent him an e-mail asking for his story:

*"I knew your Mom was with the ladies on Tuesday quilting at Tavistock Mennonite Church. I was in my office just opening up my emails - and it was then that I read Will Loewen's email that he sent me. In it he mentioned that while in Korea he tries to "keep up" on what is happening in Tavistock, the Mennonite witness, and if there are any births, deaths, etc. he wants to know about. So, on his computer he has GOOGLE regularly post references to Tavistock and Mennonite. It was through that link that he read the article printed in the Winnipeg Free Press. It was while Will was serving at Tavistock Mennonite Church that your dad passed away. Will expressed to me some thoughts and sent me the link."*

Isn't modern technology mind boggling! We were recently informed the story of the boots will also be appearing in the *MB Herald*, the *Canadian Mennonite* and the *Lethbridge Herald*.

I spent this past Monday afternoon with my mother asking her questions, looking at dad's two photo albums and autograph books, and exemption and travel documents related to my dad's CO experience. Ironically, among those documents was also a Notice of Disposition of Claim for Exemption from World War I, for my grandpa John E. Lichti, my dad's father, dated November 29, 1917, giving exemption from combatant service on account of religious belief. As well, there is a certificate of protection and Canada Registration Board Certificate for my grandpa, which he was required to carry on him at all times.

Now let me tell you about my dad's story. Some of his story he had recorded in this little brown book. Some came from other sources which will be identified.

This is a snippet of what my father wrote:

*"In September 1939, Canada declared war against Germany, and by early 1940 the National Service Board began a registration of everyone between the ages of 18 to 40 in order to get a national assessment of all available man power.*

*When you reached draft age, you were called to take a medical examination. If you passed your medical examination A1, you were subject to be called for military training by the Department of National War Service."*

It was during this time that the historic peace churches made initial contacts with government officials, and that Mennonite rights to military exemption were negotiated. A number of elder churchmen, J.B. Martin, Jacob R. Bender, Ernie Swalm, C. F. Derstine, Noah Bearinger, Elvin Shantz, to name a few, appealed to the government to provide an alternative to serving in the war. These men, who were often out of their comfort zone dealing with Prime Ministers, high government and military officials, were able to negotiate an acceptable arrangement with Selective Service to set up work camps.

The summer of 1941, the first group of local young men were called to report to Montreal River work camp, 85 miles north of Sault Ste. Marie on the shores of Lake Superior. Being a pacifist, my dad was able to obtain Conscientious Objector Status, and in December, 1942 he was called to report to Montreal River. He received a notice for alternative service that reads: "You must leave your home on January 4, 1943 in time to allow you to connect with the Canadian Pacific train which leaves Galt, Ontario at 9:13 p.m. via Toronto to Sault Ste. Marie."

165 young men, ages 21 to 25 were called to work on the Trans Canada Highway #17. In the bitter cold northern winter, with temperature at 42 degrees below zero, far from civilization, my father, along with many other young men worked 8 hours per day, for 50 cents a day or under 7 cents an hour! Here they cleared trees

and brush, moved gravel and stones for fill, dug through frozen terrain, and shoveled gravel onto trucks by hand or onto a sleigh pulled by a team of horses, making way for the Trans Canada Highway. Their tools – pickaxe, hand shovels and 2-man logging saws.

Dad writes: *“In the spring of 1943, the National Selective Service felt we would be of more value to the country in agricultural and industrial employment, so we were called back home to work on farms or in canning factories.”* My father came home and went to work for a farmer who lived two concessions away, and required help during the summer months. By fall the work was finished. My mother stated that dad always felt this farmer, who had no use for Mennonites being exempted from military service, registered a complaint about my dad’s performance which my father always felt was unjustified. Personally, I can believe that. My father was a perfectionist, and growing up it always seemed you could never do a job well enough to meet his high standards.

For the CO’s service as a farm labourer, farm wages were pegged at \$40 per month, of which \$25. was sent to the Canadian Red Cross. Married men were allowed \$10 extra per month, and only \$15 deducted for the Red Cross. My father was a single man for the first year, as my parents were married in November, 1945.

After his farm work term was completed, dad had to report to an Alternate Service Officer at the Department of Labour, National Selective Service, in Galt, where he was handed a notice to report for service in British Columbia to replace married men who had been serving there. It was most unusual to be sent into CO camp a second time. If assistance was required as a farm labourer, you were exempted, although this was not fool-proof. My father came from a family of 6 boys, of whom 3 were of draft age, so maybe someone felt that was enough farm assistance? My mother stated that dad didn’t have any ill feelings about being sent to British Columbia. He saw it as an opportunity to see “the world” and meet Mennonite men from other parts of Canada. A time, 1943, when traveling wasn’t a common occurrence.

So, in November my father left by train for Vancouver, transferring to Green Timber Manning Depot in New Westminster, BC on the lower mainland and then to Lake Cowichan on Vancouver Island, where his younger brother Stan was already stationed. Here the men were issued a numbered metal bracelet, similar to a dog tag, to identify victims who may be caught in a forest fire. We still have his identification bracelet, as well as the train ticket to Vancouver. Dad’s ID number on his bracelet is 7728.

Here they worked at a government reforestation project which entailed cutting firewood from burnt out snags, and cleaned up in preparation for planting tree seedlings. It was here that dad met Rufus Jutzi, Tom & Terry’s father, and their friendship continued until dad’s death. My father always spoke very highly of Rufus. My mother thought Rufus was the camp cook. In dad’s photo album is a picture of Rufus carving a turkey.

Before returning home to Ontario, dad had hernia surgery at King’s Daughter Hospital in Duncan, British Columbia, where he spent 12 days in bed, was released from hospital and traveled home by train. We have his return train ticket dated March 18, 1944. When reporting back to the National Selective Service, an alternate service officer looked at dad’s file and remarked that he should never have been sent to BC.

I asked my mother how the predominately Lutheran community in the Tavistock/East Zorra Township area felt about the Mennonite boys exemption from military service. She said that young people were advised not to go into town on Saturday night, to keep a low profile, and be on their best behaviour. Vernon Zehr, pastor at Cassel Mennonite church where our family attended, wrote a booklet reflecting on events in his lifetime. In this book “Reflections”, he has a chapter entitled “The World at War”, and I would like to quote what Vernon wrote:

*“Many of the draftees went into the army unwillingly, perhaps for a variety of reasons. Mennonite youth were able to get deferments for conscientious reasons. This created feelings of resentment and some ill will even in communities which before had been very congenial. It did not seem right to people that their sons should be drafted for cannon fodder as many were killed or maimed, while the conscientious objector on the next farm was allowed to stay at home.”*

What is the significance of these old worn out boots? These boots represent an era when young men stood firm in their belief that war was wrong and chose not to be conscripted into military service. These boots talk about many steps and many miles walked to promote peace. They represent a commitment to faith, and a willingness to follow conscience and the Anabaptist teachings on peacemaking.

CO camp, as it is most commonly referred to, expanded the range of my father’s world, and through the years, he would talk about the other men he met. He took great pride in showing his camp photo albums to his five grandsons. He would remind them that his pay was 50 cents a day, and pork and beans was a daily meal.

Along with the boots our family donated a metal sock drying rack and a dozen or more metal tacks which were driven into the soles of the boots for extra traction. These humble and worn boots provide a valuable and rare glimpse into the lives of the "CO boys." Also in my parent's safe, we found a small first aid kit and a number of ration coupons from the time, as well as a list of men from various faith groups who also received military service exemptions and who were in Montreal River Alternative Service Work Camp in January 1943. Faith groups listed are Mennonites, Amish Mennonite which included my dad, Mennonite Brethren, Old Order Mennonite, United Mennonite, Waterloo Conference, Christadelphian, Pentecostal, Plymouth Brethren, and Gospel Hall.

My dad's boots, now at the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg, and some other artifacts on loan will be part of a temporary exhibit at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa from June 2010 to January 2011 highlighting the history of peace advocacy in Canada. If only my father were still living to see all the publicity and fuss he and his old worn out leather boots are getting. I know he would be deeply humbled. My dad spoke more with his actions than with words. Imagine if we would have kept the boots to ourselves hidden in a storage area or thrown them out as "useless trash". The world wouldn't know anything about my dad or his CO story! Sometimes it pays to be a packrat!

Conrad Stoesz indicates there are very few artifacts related to the experience of CO's. If there are artifacts in your family that you no longer want to keep and would like to have kept for the future as a reminder of a difficult period of our Mennonite History, or if you would be willing to lend them for the peace exhibit in Ottawa, please speak to me or Conrad Stoesz. Do it soon while we still have the people who can tell us the story!

And now you know the rest of the story.